Written evidence submitted by Michael Achtman (ATW0151)

1. I am writing in support of the Access to Work programme as someone who has ten years experience with the programme.

2. As former Access Manager at Graeae Theatre and as an artist who works with and supports many disabled artists, I have witnessed how the programme assists artists in the workplace and in professional situations, and I have seen how it has enabled artists to flourish in their chosen careers.

3. Graeae Theatre company is one of the UK’s leading theatre companies working with and showcasing the work of Deaf and disabled artists. As Access Coordinator and then Access Manager there from 2005-2014, I helped coordinate twenty to forty Access to Work applications per year, both for Graeae permanent staff and for freelance artists and other staff who worked with us on our theatre productions, workshops and other activities.

4. Because access support is so crucial to the work that Graeae does, Graeae has traditionally followed a policy of coordinating the AtW applications and claims for freelance workers as well as regular staff. This is for numerous reasons: 1) Deaf and disabled people usually found the process intimidating or difficult to navigate and we wanted to be sure that the agreements were successfully instituted and 2) freelance artists did not have the cash flow to pay for their own access support during the project and so Graeae paid support worker fees and expenses and then filed claims to be reimbursed.

5. This proved to be a successful system of managing access support. By coordinating the claims as third party, we helped to introduce the Access to Work programme to numerous artists who later went on to use it for other work. I should point out that my role as coordinator of these applications, which used up a good portion of my time, was never funded by Access to Work but rather was funding through Graeae’s operating budget. Additional time was demanded by Graeae’s administrative and finance teams to process these applications and subsequent claims.

6. Graeae is a model of success in terms of employing and profiling disabled actors, production staff, administrators and producers, and the work Graeae does would not be possible without the Access to Work programme.

7. Jenny Sealey, Artistic Director and CEO of Graeae, requires communication support from BSL interpreters in her work, which includes directing the company as well as individual touring productions and outreach work. Jenny is an advocate and a spokesperson for disability arts nationally and internationally. In 2012 she was Co-Artistic Director of the London 2012 Paralympic Opening Ceremony. For the ceremony, Jenny employed numerous performers who had been trained in aerial work by Graeae over the course of previous years. Many of these performers benefited from access support through AtW programme, including support workers, BSL interpreters and travel to work support.

8. Since 2012, Graeae has raised its status to a high international profile, and has recently collaborated in co-productions with a Brazilian circus company, Crescer e Viver. There is expectation that Graeae will play a role in the 2016 Rio Olympics.

9. Access to work support enables the work of Graeae as a touring theatre company. For example, a blind actor on tour requires a support worker in rehearsal and on tour to
navigate the space, to support them during travel and at the accommodation, to assist
with props and costumes set up, and to take notes where necessary. A Deaf actor who
has AtW support is able to function seamlessly in a hearing environment, allowing
Graeae performances to be inclusive, involving mix casts of Deaf and hearing actors.
This is a model of good practice and one which has enabled these artists to advance in
their careers. Former Graeae actors are now highly visible at mainstream theatre
companies across the country, and on film, television and radio (including one regular on
Coronation Street and one on EastEnders!). Their experience at Graeae through the
years have given them experience and a level of professionalism which has garnered
them a place in the media industry.

10. I am also a freelance theatre and film writer, director and dramaturg who collaborates
with numerous disabled artists. In my practice, I have worked with many artists whose
work has been facilitated through support from Access to Work, including visual artist
Caglar Kimyoncu and writer Alex Bulmer.

11. I am originally from Canada and the difference in the working opportunities for disabled
people there, who do not benefit from a programme like Access to Work, is striking. In
Canada, as in many other countries, support for disabled people in the workplace is
either voluntary or must be funded by the employer. In practice, employers are loathe to
hire a Deaf or disabled worker, being fearful of the expense, and most disabled people in
Canada are unemployed or underemployed. The Canadian disability arts scene is very
minimal, and when you ask artists what their biggest obstacle is they tell you it's a lack of
support. On hearing of the UK Access to Work programme they listen with awe and
envy.

12. I believe that the Access to Work programme is one of the huge employment success
stories in the UK and one which is has improved the lives of Deaf and disabled people
and consequently benefitted the country. From my own experience at Graeae and as a
freelance artist I have seen how it has nurtured a disability arts scene as advanced as
any in the world.

13. I wholeheartedly recommend the continuation of the programme. At present, however, I
have concerns at what seem to be draconian regulation of the system, and the chaos
that has been brought about by recent restructuring.

14. Over the past year, I and many others who work in the field have become aware of
tighter restrictions around the programme. Despite the message put out that DWP was
trying to spread the word about AtW, I have found that the increased controls have
demanded a more lengthy and difficult application process, which demand more time
and resources from the applicant. Given that the process was already intimidating for
many people, particularly people with emotional and psychological issues and/or
learning disabilities, I feel that the tighter controls have actually inhibited people from
accessing the programme.

15. I would also point out that the past year or two dealing with Access to Work has felt
extremely chaotic. Throughout my first several years at Graeae, there were specific
advisers that I was dealing with on an ongoing basis. They were familiar with the type of
work that we did and the needs of artists who work with the company.

16. The restructuring in the past year has created a situation where there are constantly new
advisers working on our cases who have no experience of media and theatre, and there
is no consistency from one adviser to the next in the way applications are handled -
different questions every time. Also the waiting time in handling applications has been
abysmal, and responsivity has been terrible. We have spent hours and days repeatedly calling and/or emailing in attempts to follow up on applications. Applications were often not approved until long past the dates when projects started, which created a situation of huge responsibility and risk for the artists and companies involved, who needed to incur the expenses without confirmation of support.

17. The new rules around applications whereby emailed applications are no longer accepted, and a Deaf person must get someone (a volunteer) to phone in the application on their behalf are disempowering and discriminatory and reduces their professionalism.

18. It's hard to see how all this restructuring, hiring of new staff and letting go of experienced advisers could actually result in a savings of money. It seems like a lot of money is being spent on restructuring and retraining DWP employees, at the same time that AtW benefits are being clawed back from traditional levels - not a happy use of public money.

19. Advisers should be trained in the areas they are supporting. There should be consistency in the questions they ask and information that is demanded. There should be consistency of advisers, i.e., people who have ongoing agreements should be assigned an adviser on a long-term basis, so that when they have a new application they don't need to start at square one explaining their support requirements.

20. While I realize that there is a lot of public media around benefit fraud and a need to reduce governmental budgets, it feels like in the past year the Access to Work advisers have gone overboard in their effort to deny support, to come back to the applicant with more and more questions, and to whittle down levels of support that have been traditionally granted.

21. At present, there is a bullying approach where it feels like advisers are doing their best to deny support and find holes in applicants' requests. This has replaced a supportive approach where it used to feel like advisers were guiding applicants through the process. A supportive approach is crucial for applicants new to the process, as well as applicants with experience of mental illness, cognitive issues, and learning disabilities. The experience of many of us who have worked in the field for years and of disabled artists themselves should be recognized and listened to. We know from experience what support is needed - and we are not trying to "rip off" the system.

22. The attempt to institute new rules around Deaf and hard of hearing applicants' use of BSL interpreters has been a disaster. The "30 hour rule" which was instituted without consultation and without a proper understanding of the needs of BSL users, is not feasible. I am sure you have numerous contributions on this subject but, as just one example, the attempt to reduce Graeae Artistic Director Jenny Sealey's annual support budget by approximately 50% after a decade at the present rate and in light of her burgeoning success and increased workload is simply not acceptable.

23. I have been told by an AtW Regional Manager that Access to Work is considering withdrawing or limiting AtW support for work that is undertaken internationally by UK workers and I hope this is not the case. For artists as for other professionals, working internationally (including showing work at international expositions, participating in international forums and panels, collaborating with international artists) is a crucial component of their careers, and access support is key to allowing artists to accept these opportunities. Withdrawing this support would mean limiting the careers of Deaf and disabled UK artists and would be unfair and discriminatory. The UK is currently a world leader in showcasing work created by and including Deaf and disabled artists. The British Council has recognized this by including many of these artists in their
international programmes, and this international work has been facilitated through Access to Work.

24. I appreciate the opportunity to input on this consultation, and I hope that the process results in a reinvigorated and robust Access to Work programme.

19 June 2014